

Making a Better Fire Team Leader

Subject Area Leadership

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Making a Better Fire Team Leader

Contemporary Issues Paper

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Fire team leaders are an indispensable member of an infantry battalion; unfortunately, many junior Marines are put into these positions of responsibility without being properly prepared. Transitioning from being a member of a fire team to leading a fire team is extremely challenging. Currently, fire team leaders make decisions on the streets of Iraq that have strategic level consequences. The formal education process to prepare fire team leaders has been historically neglected. The core capabilities identified in The Infantry Training and Readiness Manual (NAVMC 3500.87 dated 01 Sep 05) are insufficient for the current operating environment.¹ The Marine Corps could address the lack of formal education for fire team leaders by implementing a fire team leader's course that includes advanced leadership, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Background

The current operating environment in Iraq is arguably more complex than any encountered in Marine Corps history. One of the numerous lessons learned generated from units returning from Iraq focus on the critical role that fire team leaders play in

¹ U.S. Marine Corps, NAVMC 3500.87, *The Infantry Training and Readiness manual*, 1 September 2005, chapter 6.

decentralized operations.² Infantry skill sets normally fundamental for squad leaders and above are now a requirement of fire team leaders. The battlefields of today are dynamic and require fire team leaders to make decisions that were historically made by marines of a much more senior rank.

The Marine Corps invests valuable time and money training and educating infantry leaders from the rank of sergeant and above in formal schools. The squad leader's course is a great example of quality training and education. It is an eight-week program of instruction that focuses on infantry fundamentals and advanced tactics, techniques, and procedures. Graduates of the squad leader's course are equipped with valuable infantry skill sets that are essential to leading a squad of Marines successfully in combat operations.

Such a school does not exist for fire team leaders. The fire team is the smallest maneuver element in an infantry battalion. Many subject matter experts on leadership suggest that the optimum span of control for a leader and those being led is three to one.³ Therefore a valid assumption would be that fire team leaders are the foundation of leadership within an infantry battalion and their leadership is critical to the

² U.S. Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *2d Battalion 4th Marines Observations*. 9 January 2006.

³ Doran, Diane, PhD, *Impact of the Manager's Span of Control on leadership and performance*, September 2004.

success of an infantry unit in combat. Consequently it is imperative that fire team leaders possess the technical and tactical skill sets to lead and train their respective fire teams. The training and education of fire team leaders in many cases is based on experiences their squad leaders have shared with them. Rather than receiving a standardized formal education, the only guidance fire team leaders receive in many cases is determined by those marines' chain of command. Unfortunately the majority of squad leaders do not view such interactions with their fire team leaders as their primary priority.

A Solution

A possible solution is the development of a fire team leader's course. The squad leader's core capabilities listed in the Infantry Training and Readiness Manual more accurately reflect the skill sets that a fire team leader should possess and this would be a good starting point for the standardization of training fire team leaders.⁴ Initially these courses should be developed and executed within each infantry battalion. After a pre-determined number of local fire team leader's courses have been conducted at the infantry battalions, an after action review conference, consisting of key leaders from participating

⁴U.S. Marine Corps, NAVMC 3500.87, *The Infantry Training and Readiness manual*, 1 September 2005, chapter 6.

infantry battalions, should convene. The end state of the conference would be the development of fire team leader core competencies and the implementation of a standardized program of instruction (POI) for a formalized fire team leader's course.

The First Step

Developing and administering a standardized written exam to current and potential fire team leaders is the logical first step in the implementation of a fire team leader's course. The initial evaluation will provide valuable insight in regards to the proficiency level of current and potential fire team leaders. In the initial development phases of the fire team leaders course, the written evaluation will be the major determining factor as to which skill sets require more focus. Standardization of the POI throughout the Marine Corps is critical; however, during the development phase there should be flexibility in order to get an infantry battalion's fire team leaders to an acceptable level of proficiency.

The Details

The fire team leader's course should consist of an eight-week training cycle divided into stages with an emphasis on combat conditioning to include the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP). Methods of instruction should include lectures, demonstrations, and most importantly practical

applications. The following table is a proposed program of instruction for a fire team leader's course:

Stage	Focus	Major objectives
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual actions - Individual training of fire team leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing the fire team leaders instructional and leadership skill set - Reiteration of the importance of self discipline in a unit and the fire team leaders role in the enforcement of self discipline - Continuing actions and the fire team leaders role - Maintenance of all weapons organic to rifle platoon - Daylight and NVD zeroing of all weapons organic to a rifle platoon - Proper field firing and individual movement techniques - Decision making, mission analysis, and combat orders training - Preparation for combat, pre combat checks, and inspection techniques - Operation of radios organic to rifle company instruction and radio procedure training - Call for fire, close air support, and HLZ procedures - Field skills
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Buddy teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team leader's ability to lead and instruct a buddy team within a fire team on critical infantry skill sets - Train the trainer segment on how to train a buddy team on its specific duties within a fire team - Buddy team movement techniques - Live fire training, static to fire and movement, covering achieving effective suppression through the use of combining weapon systems organic to a buddy team - Communication - Development of buddy team standard operating procedures (SOP's)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team leader's ability to lead and instruct the entire fire team - Fire team movement techniques during offensive and defensive operations - Command and control of the fire team during live fire exercises, specifically positioning of fire team, and control and massing of fires - Development of fire team standard

		operating procedures (SOP's)
4	- Patrolling (reconnaissance and combat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team leader's ability to plan, organize, conduct, report/debrief, and lead a patrol - Satellite patrolling techniques (techniques on maintaining positive communication throughout) - Patrolling will be conducted and evaluated in both field and urban environment - During the last two days of stage 4, fire teams will consolidate into squads and conduct patrolling in order to teach them how they fit into the bigger picture and work with the squad leader
5	- Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team leader's ability to instruct and lead his Marines in offensive and defensive operations in MOUT - Satellite patrolling - Integration of mechanized/armor assets with a patrol - Individual, buddy pairs, and fire team movement techniques (exterior and interior) - Shoot/don't shoot lanes - Breaching techniques - Clearing techniques - Conduct an attack and defend - During last two days of Stage 5 fire teams will consolidate into squads and conduct MOUT skill sets
6	- Current Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire team leaders will be exposed to lessons learned and after actions from the current fight - Current reading assignments and guided discussions that lead into sand table exercises - Fire team leaders will be exposed to the most current friendly and enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP's) up to the platoon level - Goal is to enhance the fire team leaders situational awareness on current operations and force him to think current TTP's - Course will conclude with a final comprehensive evaluation that spans the entire program consisting of written and practical exercises

The current fire team leader core capabilities should be upgraded and mirror that of the current core capabilities of the

squad leader within the Infantry Training and Readiness Manual and core competencies of the Infantry Squad Leaders Course. The adjustment would be fairly painless and the benefits would be immense. These young Marines are making decisions daily on the streets of Iraq that have strategic implications the least the Marine Corps can do is to properly prepare them.

Counter argument

Logical opposing views in regards to the development of a fire team leader's course would be that the Marine Corps cannot find the time, money, and resources to support such a proposal. That due to the current operational tempo it is not feasible to begin such a project and the current training cycle that infantry battalions negotiate prior to deploying to Iraq adequately prepare fire team leaders. All valid concerns, however, the price that the Marine Corps could potentially pay in human cost if a fire team leader's course is not pursued could potentially be inexcusable.

Conclusion

The responsibility and authority bestowed upon fire team leaders is immense considering their average age and experience level. Currently the formal training and education of fire team leaders is not sufficient. These young infantry leaders are being put into positions where they have to learn valuable skill sets the hard way and ultimately the mission and the Marines

that they lead suffer. The Marine Corps has a moral obligation to ensure that the highly coveted "strategic corporals" are properly trained and educated for the challenges of the current operating environment. A formal course emphasizing advance leadership, tactics, techniques, and procedures is critical to developing competent fire team leaders.

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